



U. S. FISH & WILDLIFE SERVICE

News Release

South Florida Ecological Services Office

U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service

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Date: April 5, 2005

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U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service establishes a Manatee refuge in Lee County, Florida

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service announced today that it has established five former State manatee speed zones as an additional Federal manatee refuge in Lee County, Florida. The regulation establishing this refuge will appear in the Thursday, April 7, edition of the *Federal Register* and went into effect on Monday, April 4, 2005.

The areas affected by this final designation are in Matlacha Pass, Estero Bay, southwest side of Pine Island, eastern San Carlos Bay and the mouth of the Caloosahatchee River. Four manatees were killed from watercraft collisions in these areas during 2004.

On August 6, 2004, the Service published a proposed rule in the *Federal Register* to establish the Pine Island-Estero Bay Manatee Refuge by standard rulemaking procedures. Due to delays in scheduling the public hearing caused by the hurricanes Charley, Frances, and Jeanne, and to provide for continued protection of this area during the rulemaking process while allowing adequate time for public hearings and comments on the proposed designation, the Service used its emergency authority to re-establish the temporary Pine Island-Estero Bay Manatee Refuge. This emergency designation expires on April 5, 2005.

“We are taking this final action in areas where we believe an immediate danger to manatees exists,” said Sam Hamilton, the Service’s southeast regional director. “As we have seen from the 2004 data – and this is also supported by historic scientific data – manatees in these areas are at risk of being killed or injured in collisions with boats.”

The manatee refuge corresponds exactly with the previous State speed zones. The Federal restrictions now in place in each area are also the same as the previous State restrictions: They require watercraft to proceed at slow speed outside designated channels and at less than 25 miles per hour in the designated channels. One difference between the restrictions is there are no provisions under Federal law to allow exemptions to the federally-designated manatee refuge. Thus, businesses and individuals who previously held State exemption permits were made aware in April 2004 that their permits are no longer valid.

This Federal manatee refuge will not eliminate access rights for owners of waterway properties. Public and private property owners are permitted to access property that lies within a designated manatee refuge. They may conduct any authorized boating activity by operating watercraft at slow speed according to posted limits in designated refuge areas.

Additional information on this action, including maps of the designated areas, is available on the Service's South Florida web site at verobeach.fws.gov.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is the principal Federal agency responsible for conserving, protecting and enhancing fish, wildlife and plants and their habitats for the continuing benefit of the American people. The Service manages the 100-million- acre National Wildlife Refuge System, which encompasses 545 national wildlife refuges, thousands of small wetlands and other special management areas. It also operates 69 national fish hatcheries, 64 fishery resources offices, and 81 ecological services field stations. The agency enforces Federal wildlife laws, administers the Endangered Species Act, manages migratory bird populations, restores nationally significant fisheries, conserves and restores wildlife habitat such as wetlands, and helps foreign and Native American Tribal governments with their conservation efforts. It also oversees the Federal Assistance program, which distributes hundreds of millions of dollars in excise taxes on fishing and hunting equipment to State fish and wildlife agencies.

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A highly detailed description of the boundaries of the Pine Island-Estero Bay Manatee Refuge can be found on-line at verobeach.fws.gov and will appear in the April 7, 2005 *Federal Register*.